

# MANUSCRIPTA



November 1966

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Published by

**SAINT LOUIS UNIVERSITY LIBRARY**

Three Times Annually

MARCH

JULY

NOVEMBER

Subscription per Year \$4.00

Single Issue \$1.50

PRINTED BY  
KLENE PRINTING CO.  
HANNIBAL, MISSOURI  
U. S. A.



# MANUSCRIPTA

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VOL. X

NOVEMBER 1966

No. 3

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## Our Contributors

Lowrie J. Daly, S. J., is Professor of History at Saint Louis University.

Charles T. Dougherty is Professor of English at the University of Missouri at Saint Louis.

Robert E. Lewis is Assistant Professor of English at Indiana University.

William C. McAvoy is Professor of English at Saint Louis University.

Leslie F. Smith is Professor of History at the University of Oklahoma.

MICROFILMED MATERIALS FROM THE ARCHIVE  
OF THE SACRED CONGREGATION  
"DE PROPAGANDA FIDE"

LOWRIE J. DALY

Saint Louis University

In his preface to Carl Russell Fish's excellent *Guide to the Materials for American History in Roman and Other Archives*, the General Editor, J. Franklin Jameson, wrote as follows.

In any series of guides to the materials for American history in foreign archives, the Roman archives deserve a prominent position and early treatment. Two reasons justify this statement. In the first place, although the documents in those archives relate primarily to ecclesiastical affairs, yet religious history constantly deserves the attention of the student of civil as well as of ecclesiastical history, and the influence of the Catholic Church and the scope of its operations can never be appropriately defined within confessional limits. In the second place, of all the great national archives of Europe there are none that have been so little exploited for purposes of American history as those of Rome and Italy.<sup>1</sup>

Although these words were written more than fifty years ago, it still remains true that too little use is made of such archival materials. One of the recent microfilm additions to the collections at Saint Louis University includes precisely this type of material, and the purpose of this article is to interest researchers in it. The collection runs to about 250,000 manuscript pages and it is from the Archive of the Sacred Congregation de Propaganda Fide (for the propagation of the faith).<sup>2</sup>

This congregation was definitely established by Gregory XV (1621-1623) in his constitution *Inscrutabili* of June 22, 1622, although there had been some discussion about the formation of such a congregation for almost fifty years.<sup>3</sup> The constitution does

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<sup>1</sup> Carl Russell Fish, *Guide to the Materials for American History in Roman and Other Italian Archives* (Washington, D.C.: Published by the Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1911), p. iii.

<sup>2</sup> The writer is heavily indebted to the most helpful brochure of P. Nicola Kowalsky, O.M.L., *Inventario dell'Archivio storico della S. Congregazione "de Propaganda Fide,"* Les Cahiers de la Nouvelle Revue de science missionnaire, XVII (Administration der Neuen Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft, Schöneck / Beckenried/ [Schweiz], 1961), pp. 38. Cf. also the description in Fish, *op. cit.*, 119-95, and the article in the *Catholic Encyclopedia* by U. Beghini, "Propaganda" (XII, 456 ff.) and that of U. Bertini, "S.C. di Propaganda Fide," in the *Enciclopedia Cattolica* (IV 237 ff.).

<sup>3</sup> Fish, *op. cit.*, 119.

not clearly delimit the congregation's powers; rather these have to be ascertained from its activities. Once in action the Propaganda became one of the most important elements in papal administration. Originally it was directed not only to infidels but also to the conversion of heretics and the scope of its work was worldwide. It was not confined to countries officially considered to be non-Christian. The general purpose of the congregation was the correlation of missionary activity, and the congregation divided the world into provinces with a nuncio who was assigned to act as a representative. For instance, the nuncio of Spain handled Spanish American matters, the nuncio for France those of New France, while the internuncio at Brussels had England and Holland and their American colonial possessions.<sup>4</sup> The work of the Congregation was further modified by Pius X in 1909 and again by Pius XI in 1938.<sup>5</sup>

During the period covered by the microfilmed materials, the general work of the Congregation dealt with ecclesiastical matters in the so-called "missionary countries," by which was meant those countries which did not have a hierarchy or one which was only imperfectly established. The Catholic Church in the United States, for example, was under Propaganda until 1908. Thus these files contain a very great deal of data on the history of the church in Asia, Africa, Europe and the Western Hemisphere.

It should be emphasized from the outset that the Archive of Propaganda is not a collection of cultural or scientific materials like an ordinary manuscript library, but a working collection which is the result of the administrative activity of the Congregation *de Propaganda Fide*.<sup>6</sup> The Archive actually began with the Congregation and has been placed in various localities, starting with a spot in the Vatican Palace designated by Urban VIII in 1627 and finally coming to its present location in Bernini's beautiful "Palazzo di Propaganda Fide," situated in downtown Rome in the Piazza d'Espagna. The first archivist was a Scotsman, Rev. William Leslie, who was appointed in 1660.<sup>7</sup> Then during the French occupation (1810) the whole Archive was taken to France but after the fall of Napoleon was restored again to Rome.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>5</sup> U. Bertini, *art. cit.*, and the papal documents noted there.

<sup>6</sup> Kowalsky, *op. cit.*, 5.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

As was noted the archive itself is the result of the actual work of the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith. This congregation consists of a Cardinal Prefect and some other Cardinals nominated by the Pope, and its meeting, called a "Congregazione Generale," is held once a month to discuss the more important ecclesiastical business. Questions which demand a deeper and more lengthy study are turned over to a special commission of Cardinals designated as a *Congregazione Particolare*, while for the ordinary daily business there is the weekly meeting of the Cardinal Prefect with the Secretary and the *Minutanti*. Problems which demand immediate papal attention are submitted to the Pope in "Udienza." In all these various meetings the decisions taken are communicated to the parties interested in the form of decrees, instructions, or letters.

Different *fondi* correspond to the files of these various groups. For instance the "Atti delle Congregazioni" correspond to the actions and decisions of the General Congregations, as do the "Scritture Originali riferite." Then there is a *fondo* for the "Congregazioni Particolori" and so on. Selections from these different *fondi* form the materials which have been microfilmed for use in America and are available at Saint Louis University. The microfilmed selections are divided into three groups.

First of all there are microfilms of the indexes of the whole Archivio. These total about 116 volumes of which at present 110 have been filmed. They fall into about fourteen different subtypes, and the following examples will give some idea of their nature and extent. There is a general index to the archives from 1622 to 1657 in three volumes arranged in alphabetical order and entitled *Indice Generale fine ad Aprile 1657*. Then there is a most important series of indexes to the *Acta Sacrae Congregationis de Propaganda Fide* which in turn are subdivided in various ways. There is a chronological index of the *Acta* in sixteen volumes from 1622 to 1860, followed by a geographical one by continent (Africa, America, Asia, Europe) in eight volumes. There is one "by subject matter" in seven volumes and one for the Eastern Rite in nine volumes. Some of the other types include a two-volume index to the "Faculty Grants" and a sixteen-volume index to the *Udienze* series which refer to the materials submitted directly to the Pope in special audience, and this index has both a subject matter and a geographical division. Then there is a twenty-three volume index to the "*Lettere della Sacra Congregazione di Propaganda Fide*" which means the outgoing letters of the Sacred Congregation, and an index to the *Biglietti*

*di Mons. Segretario* which refers to the notes written by the Secretary of the Congregation. This last is arranged geographically and runs from 1750 to 1877. The index to the Decrees issued by the Congregation is arranged both geographically and by subject matter and runs from 1719 to 1871. There is also a special index to Chinese Affairs (*Atti della Sacra Congregazione della Cina*) which comprises six volumes and runs from 1665-1856. There are some index volumes also for formularies, briefs and bulls, as well as for circulars and printed materials. Not all of these various indexes cover the total period of the Congregation's existence, but most of them cover a span of a century or more, and their very diversity makes it possible for scholars to approach the records in many different ways. Still it is evident that the indexes were made for administrative use and convenience and on the supposition that they would remain an office tool.<sup>8</sup>

The second group of materials are the *Acta Sanctae Congregationis* whose indexes have just been described. These are the records of the meetings of the Cardinals in General Congregation and the decisions which have been taken. The matter is explained by the *Cardinale Ponente* or by the Secretary, and the *Acta* contain this exposition and the resolutions taken upon the different questions brought up. Obviously this body of knowledge is most important not only for an understanding of the general principles and policies of the Congregation but for the missionary history of the Church throughout the world. During the first decades each volume usually covers two years, but from 1651 on there is a volume for each year except for the period from 1808-1814 which are contained in only one volume (*Diario*).<sup>9</sup> There are other combined years but later than the period which the microfilms cover, for following the hundred year rule common to many European archives the microfilmed documents only go as far as 1861.

Up until the year 1817 the *Atti* are in manuscript but after that date they are printed, and this greatly facilitates their use. Up to volume 25 (1657) the *Acta* are in Latin but after that date Italian is used. Together with the change from Latin to Italian there is found a more ample treatment of the materials discussed, sometimes taking up three or five or more pages.<sup>10</sup> The microfilmed copies begin with volume 1 in 1621 and continue

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>9</sup> Vol. 175.

<sup>10</sup> Kowalsky, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

down to 1862 (Volume 226) and vary in length from some 300 to more than 900 pages. Before 1657 there was an introductory rubric which gave the place and date of the meetings and those in attendance. After 1657 the meetings were held regularly in the *Palazzo di Propaganda*, and only the date and names of participants were recorded, and these details were kept in Latin.

Let us take a sample volume of the *Acta* to note the type of materials which it contains. The sample chosen is the volume for 1775 (volume 145) and it must be confessed that this is a good readable volume. Some of the early volumes are now very fragile and the ink has come through from the other page making them at times very difficult if not impossible to decipher. Still this frequently is the fate of the seventeenth century manuscripts in comparison with those of earlier centuries. The index to this volume gives some idea of the variety of its contents. For instance under the heading of Albania there are items on matrimonial problems and other problems in some of the dioceses together with the decisions taken by the authorities there. For England faculties are given regarding the ordination of clerics under the title "of the Mission" and some regulations for the blessing of Holy Oils. Under Barbary there is a document describing the missions, some regulations on the application of the fasting laws, and regulations regarding the celebration of Mass by Catholic priests in non-Catholic churches (1757). Under Egypt the problem of a Maronite priest who was hearing confessions of persons of another rite is discussed. Ireland usually has several items and this volume is no exception; most of the items refer to administrative decisions taken because of the ill health of a bishop or the discussion of some local jurisdictional problem. Under the designation *Indie Orientali* there are items referring to the baptism of the dying and of the children of infidels as well as a "relation" of the one of the Missions in the territory. Much of these materials, as is natural, refers to the ordinary jurisdictional life of the missionary church and its problems, but in the various "relations" of the different missions which are often included in the *Acta*, there are many precious historical materials which apparently have thus far not been exploited.

As another example let us take Volume 185 which covers 1822. Although the index is still handwritten much of the material in this volume is printed. Under the caption *America* there are items referring to the administration of the diocese of Virginia, an item regarding the conferring of a graduate degree

at the College of St. Mary's in Baltimore, and materials about the spiritual administration of Florida. In the section for England there are items dealing with the selection of a new coadjutor for the Vicar Apostolic of the Western District of England and an item regarding a privilege of the President of the Pontifical College of Stonyhurst. Under *Malta* there is a summary regarding an "Arabo-Italo Dizionario." Under *Persia* are items referring to the Bagdad Mission. These again are matters chosen at random, but it is evident that most of the materials deal with the daily jurisdictional life of the church and often enough with the inevitable human problems and controversies that are part of it.<sup>11</sup>

The third group of selections comprises some volumes from the series entitled *Scritture riferite nei Congressi (S.C.)*, which are the materials referring to the weekly meetings of the Congregation, not to the General Congregations. From the viewpoint of the General Congregations these materials are not so important, but from the viewpoint of history, they are of great importance for they reflect in a certain way the daily life of the Missionary Church.<sup>12</sup> There are two series in this group of writings, the first of which refers to the letters sent to Propaganda from the mission lands, and for this there is an obvious geographic distribution—Ethiopia, China, etc. The second series has materials which directly refer to the Sacred Congregation or to the institutes dependent upon it, e.g., Collegio Urbano.

The materials which are on microfilm at Saint Louis University refer to Latin America and are in two series. There is first the group entitled *America Antille* covering the period from 1634 to 1892 in eleven volumes, some of them of more than 1000 pages of handwritten (and sometimes printed) materials. The second group is classified under the title *America Meridionale, dall' Istmo di Panama allo stretto di Magellano*, covering the period from 1649 to 1862 in eleven volumes. The photographic legibility of some of these documents varies considerably due to the color and quality of the paper and the condition of some of the tightly bound materials.

It is to be hoped that microfilmed materials such as those listed in this brief, introductory article will encourage American historians, sociologists and anthropologists to exploit more and more the riches of the Archives of the Propaganda.

<sup>11</sup> Fish, *op cit.*, lists items from the Acta pertinent to American history from 1622 to 1830, pp. 123-188.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.